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The Accidental Enthusiast: On Collecting World War II Books in the Internet Age

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The Accidental Enthusiast: On Collecting World War II Books in the Internet Age

It all began by accident.

I wasn't really an internet person, not tech-savvy. I was an English major, after all, a pen and paper lover down to the rag and bone shop of my heart, and nothing confounds me more than the insubstantiality of the e-book. But I was also a graduate student, and I was looking for a bargain when I started buying course-books online. I needed reading copies, and I needed them cheap.

Why not the library copy, local and free? Two reasons: one, I'm an active reader. And by active, I mean I'm a marginalia-inscribing, dog-earing, spine-cracking fiend. I read, you might say, physically – not an encouraging trait in a book collector (but like I said, this began by accident). I maul books. I feel most satisfied when a paperback reaches the duct tape stage. That matte silver spine with the permanent-marked "ULYSSES" is my reader's badge of honor. Extra points when I find myself using the front cover as a bookmark. So I like to spare the library books, as one should.

The other reason to buy – initially – likewise strides the border between physiological and psychological, and this is how I became a collector, I suppose: when I read a book – a really good book – it becomes a part of me; I *need* to have it. I want its physical presence in my home. Who knows when, in a few hours or a few years, I may need to refer to, say, Louis MacNeice's poem, "Snow"? It's not uncommon for me to buy books I've been loaned by friends or borrowed from the library, just to have them to keep. I like to see them on my shelves. I like to see the shelves fill up. Let me be honest: I judge people by their bookshelves; if they're empty, I feel nervous, like the empty shelf is a barometer of the person that owns it, just as each book on my shelves is a barometer of how I felt and what I thought when I read it. As a habitual buyer of used books, I find the weathermaps of previous readers' minds – a marginal "NO!" at a story's crisis, or an underlined phrase – make my otherwise solitary reading experience into something shared. Each reading experience becomes, in pencil-equipped hands, a documentary journey.

I got lucky early on, when I discovered Abebooks.com, an international network of independent booksellers under one web-based catalogue. Abebooks allowed me to shop online and still support small, local bookstores. The site enabled me to buy used books I might not find locally, and eight to ten days later, they arrived at my doorstep, neatly packaged, like gifts from an unmet friend. I shopped by “Lowest Total Price,” which factors in shipping, knowing that these bargain volumes would appear in various states of abuse, sometimes an ex-library hardback, sometimes a crumbling yellow mass market paperback, sometimes practically new: a glorious serendipity.

Several years ago, a professor recommended I read Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Demon Lover* for a paper I was researching, so I clicked straight to Abe and typed in the author and title. It hadn’t occurred to me that this was a short story collection and that the truly thrifty shopper could by Bowen’s whole *Collected Stories* for less. I just clicked to purchase the Lowest Total Price copy, surprised that in spite of the shipping, I was buying from the UK.

Now it was 14-16 days later, just long enough to forget what I was waiting for. But when it came, oh the thrill of that foreign postmark, the blue airmail sticker, the queen’s stamped profile. This book had come from Over There. From London, where the stories inside it take place. And what I found inside, though I wouldn’t know it from the packaging, would change the course of not just my research but my whole reading life. In a faded green dust jacket (lovingly wrapt in mylar), with once-pink gothic lettering, was a 1945 Jonathan Cape London first edition. On the copyright page is a graphic of a lion perched atop an open book, inside of which is the legend, “BOOK PRODUCTION WAR ECONOMY STANDARD.”

In my hands, with pages flimsy as tissue paper and dry, was a wartime edition of Bowen’s wartime stories. An artifact of reading under the Blitz. A piece of history, of survival. I read it very, very gingerly, like someone reading for the first time.

In her preface to *The Demon Lover*, Bowen remarks that the stories in the collection are about people’s “search for indestructible landmarks in a destructible world.”ⁱ The hallucinatory stories her characters tell themselves “are an unconscious, instinctive, saving resort of the part of the characters: life, mechanized by the controls of wartime, and emotionally torn and impoverished by changes, had to

complete itself in *some* way.”ⁱⁱⁱ In this way, Bowen wonders “whether in a sense all wartime writing is not resistance writing.”ⁱⁱⁱ It is historically certain that reading, as well as writing, was a form of resistance for British civilians during the Second World War. In spite of a paper shortage that reduced publishers’ printing allowance to forty percent of its prewar volume, per capita sales of books increased by fifty percent from 1938-1944.^{iv} In the dark nights, under German bombardment, the home front appears to have turned to reading as a form of resistance. Angus Calder notes that “a thirst for classics was impossible to slake; new copies of novels by [English authors] were eventually quite unobtainable.”^v Book-buyers often resorted to the black market. Meanwhile, the bombardment of London warehouses destroyed over twenty-million unissued volumes, five-million in one night alone. Blitzed libraries lost millions of books, and the number of books lost in the private libraries of the million-plus destroyed homes is impossible to know.^{vi}

So when I received my copy of *The Demon Lover*, with its frail, war-stock paper (impossible to write on; a pencil would poke through), I knew that what I held in my hands was, in effect, a survivor, a token of resistance, an undestroyed landmark from that “destructible world.” Two years later, I am writing my dissertation on the literature of World War II. Collecting books published in London during the Second World War connects me to the world that I study, but moreover, it makes present in my hands not just history but a sort of triumph, or, as Louis MacNeice said of London under the Blitz, “a visible and tangible symbol of freedom.”^{vii} Our things survive to tell our stories, and in the case of my collection, our “things” themselves *are* stories.

My book-buying budget hasn’t increased since I began my accidental journey, so as I comb history’s wreckage for these books, I rely on the same serendipity of the internet that brought me my *Demon Lover*. My method is to search for “good” or better copies that cost me less than \$30, or the price of a new hardback book. When the books come to me in the mail, I don’t know what they’re going to look like or what condition they are really in, so every time the arrival is an adventure, a little time-capsule from the past. With my budget, it means most of the books I receive are well-read, and I like this. I like imagining the hands that have touched the books – from typesetters to readers, and sometimes, with luck, to the authors themselves. One of my prizes is a signed first edition of Bowen’s war novel, *The Heat of the*

Day. When I visited the Bowen archives at the University of Texas, I checked my copy against her handwriting in the archive, and I was delighted to find my copy's signature authentic. I am fortunate to have many beautiful volumes signed by living writers, but to have a book that Elizabeth Bowen held in her hands gives me a rush, a thrill, an authentic memo from the past.

My own physical connection to the books I read drove me to this accident of collecting, and it is the physical fact of the books' histories that drives me to seek them out now. In a world that is more palpably destructible now than it was when Bowen wrote *The Demon Lover*, the fact that books persevere drives me to treasure them. In 1941, Bowen wrote to Virginia Woolf, "And were all those streets that were burnt the streets we walked about? I have never seen them since. When your flat went did that mean all the things in it too? All my life I have said, 'Whatever happens there will always be tables and chairs' – and what a mistake."^{viii} But Bowen was unmistakable when she surmised that "all wartime writing [is] resistance writing," for some of those "things" persevered, just as they helped their readers persevere in a dark time. The books I collect remind me of the importance of writing and reading in spite of – or perhaps even *to* spite – the destructibility of our world. In the age of the Kindle, the iPad, the "reading device" that subsumes even the title and the author's name to the grey electronic screen, I am celebrating the thingness of books, their covers, their pages, their indestructible words. What W.H. Auden wrote of poetry in 1939, just on the eve of that war, is equally true of each of my physical books: "it survives, / A way of happening, a mouth."

To Posterity

When books have all seized up like the books in graveyards
 And reading and even speaking have been replaced
 By other, less difficult, media, we wonder if you
 Will find in flowers and fruit the same colour and taste
 They held for us for whom they were framed in words,
 And will your grass be green, your sky be blue,
 Or will your birds be always wingless birds?

- Louis MacNeice

Notes

ⁱ Elizabeth Bowen. *The Mulberry Tree*. Ed. Hermione Lee (London: Harcourt Brace, 1986) 97.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Angus Calder. *The People's War* (New York: Random House, 1969) 590.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Louis MacNeice. *Selected Prose*. Ed. Alan Heuser (Oxford: OUP, 1990) 82.

^{viii} Bowen, 216-7.

Bibliography

Note: Because my funds are limited, my collection of wartime London editions is currently small and select. I have chosen to begin my collection with Bowen and MacNeice because they are the cornerstones of my dissertation and because, being less well-known than many of their contemporaries (like Virginia Woolf or W.H. Auden), wartime editions of their work remain within my price range.

Bowen, Elizabeth. *Bowen's Court*. London: Longmans, 1942.

---. *The Demon Lover*. London: Cape, 1945.*

---. *The Heat of the Day*. London: Cape, 1949.**

---. *Seven Winters*. London: Longmans, 1942.

MacNeice, Louis. *Autumn Journal*. London: Faber, 1939.

---. *Plant and Phantom*. London: Faber, 1941.

---. *Springboard*. London: Faber, 1944.

*The copy I am loaning is a 1946 second impression, albeit still printed under the wartime economy standards.

**I include this novel because it is Bowen's great novel *about* WWII – and my only signed first edition.
